New Directions

Volume 9 | Issue 2 Article 4

1-1-1982

Achieving Quality In Public Education

Samuel L. Banks

NATIONAL

Achieving Quality In Public Education

By Samuel L. Banks

The public schools have, since their establishment on a solid and pervasive basis following the Civil War, played a significant and pivotal role in the American socio-economic order. Education was viewed as the social elevator necessary for upward mobility and success in America.

Early efforts to provide education in colonial America, except for church groups were largely restrictive and elitist. The Boston Latin Grammar School, founded in 1635, one year prior to the establishment of Harvard College, was highly selective and elitist. Classical in its educational mission, Boston Latin prepared a select and affluent educational clientele for influential leadership roles in society. Its graduates, after matriculating at Harvard, became leaders in theology, law, teaching, and medicine during the colonial era. But a vast majority of youths were excluded from the schooling provided by Boston Latin and other private institutions that emerged.

It required the seminal and indefatigable efforts of James G. Carter, Horace Mann, and Henry Barnard — among others — to provide impetus and direction for an embryonic public school movement in America. Carter, a graduate of Harvard, is generally acclaimed as having begun the public school revival in Massachusetts.[1] An unrelenting effort was made by Carter through his writing and teaching to improve free schools and to expose shoddy teachers and books. In 1827, he presented a petition to the legislature of Massachusetts calling for the establishment of a state normal school. It was defeated by one vote.[2] Nonetheless, he was undeterred in his efforts to have education regarded as a science, and the discovery of truth through inductive teaching.

Carter's persistence was helpful to Horace Mann in extending the public school movement in the latter half of the 19th century. When the Massachusetts state legislature created the State Board of Education in 1837, Mann was called upon to serve as secretary. After his appointment, he launched a massive and sustained statewide effort to win broad-based public acceptance for public education, writing 12 annual reports which provided lucid directions and recommendations as to how public schools might be strengthened. Mann's reputation in Massachusetts won for him prominence on a national level.

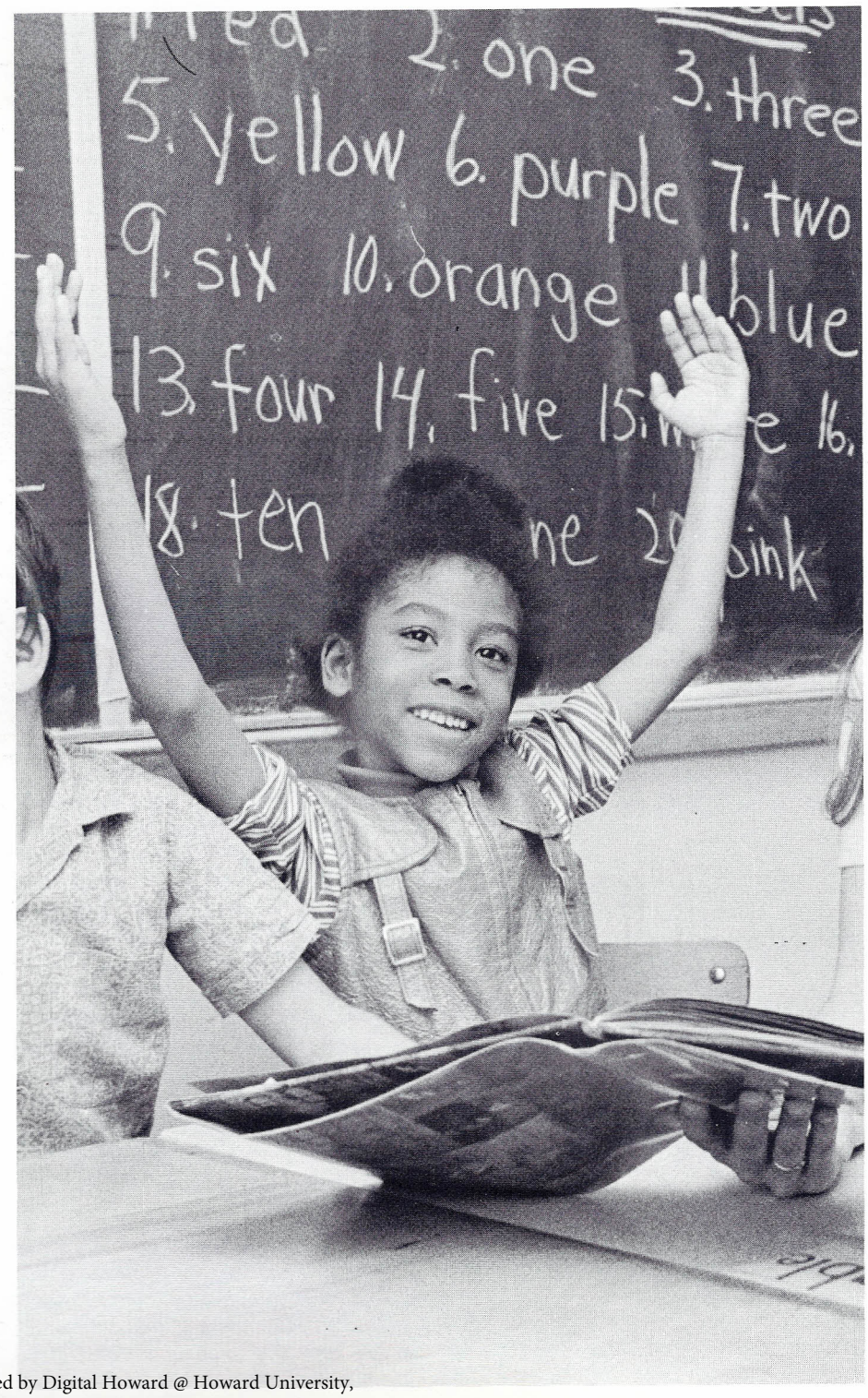
Henry Barnard was another strong advocate of education. He was responsible for introducing a bill in 1838 in the Connecticut legislature that was unanimously adopted and led to the creation of a state board of commissioners of common schools. Barnard, as was true of Mann in Massachusetts, became the first secretary of the board. He too used his position to win broad-based community support for public schools. But because of opposition that developed against him, the legislature later abolished his position. However, he was invited to Rhode Island in 1843 and was able to carry on his efforts for public schools.

Free Public Education

The extraordinary and undaunted work of Carter, Mann, Barnard — among others — established a salient for the democratization and extension of free public education in the United States. The passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 extended this belief and provided the genesis for the development of land-grant colleges in all of the states. However, no provision in this act helped Black Americans — even those who were free in 1862. (At the start of the Civil War in 1861 there were 500,000 Black Americans who were free.) But passage of the second Morrill Act in 1890 provided funding for Black land-grant colleges. In principle, at least, the nation, six years before the epochal and far-reaching *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, was making an effort to provide "separate but equal" education in the institutions of higher education.

A highly publicized and momentous court decision involving Kalamazoo, Michigan, was to further democratize and provide a legal foundation for free secondary education. Judge Thomas M. Cooley of Michigan stated his opinion in the case with clarity and force:

> *The instrument (the state constitution) submitted by the convention to the people and adopted by them provided for the establishment of free schools in every school district for at least three months in each year, and for the univer-*



sity . . . The inference seems irresistible that the people expected the tendency towards the establishment of high schools in the primary-school districts would continue until every locality capable of supporting one was supplied. If these facts do not demonstrate clearly and conclusively a general state policy, beginning in 1817 and continuing until after the adoption of the present constitution, in the direction of free schools in which education, and at their option the elements of classical education, might be brought within the reach of all the children of the state, then, as it seems to us, nothing can demonstrate it.[3]

The legal opinion rendered in the Kalamazoo case was utilized by other states to establish support for secondary education. The Kalamazoo decision served as a catalyst in helping to accelerate and buttress the egalitarian concept that free secondary education was a right that should be enjoyed by all students and not restricted to a privileged few.

The establishment of land-grant colleges as a result of the passage of the Morrill Acts, with their emphasis on the "practical arts" and more flexible curricula, also supported democratization in post-secondary education. Education — both elementary-secondary and higher education — received increased citizen support because it was viewed as a passport for success and fulfillment in life. It is significant to note that the most noteworthy breakthrough in modern times in terms of democratizing and enlarging higher education opportunities was the passage by Congress of the post-World War II Selective Service Readjustment Act (i.e., G.I. Bill of Rights). The educational benefits made available to more than five million veterans resulted in the extirpation, to a substantial degree, of economic and class barriers in higher education. Fred Hechinger makes a cogent observation relative to this point:

Through a dramatic expansion of educational access across class lines, the post-World War II G.I. Bill of Rights set in motion a trend that substantially reduced

the risk of class conflict. The subsequent massive expansion of free or low-tuition public campuses signaled what seemed the permanent removal of economic and class barriers from college gates.[4]

The Morrill Acts, the Kalamazoo decision, broad-based citizen support of secondary education and higher education, and, in recent times, the G.I. Bill and the *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka* decision solidified and expanded support for the principle of public support for free education and equality of educational opportunity.

Quality Education and Equality

The historic and epochal *Brown* decision provided the legal and moral conduit to embrace and actively support quality education and equality of educational opportunity. Speaking for a unanimous Supreme Court, Chief Justice Earl Warren, declared:

We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. *Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the law guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. This disposition makes unnecessary any discussion whether such segregation also violates the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.*[5]

The issue in American education was no longer the establishment of free elementary-secondary education, but a fierce confrontation with a much more difficult and complex phase: How to achieve quality education and equality of educational opportunity for all? While segregation in the nation's public schools is legally dead, the practical implementation of desegregation has not become a reality in the 16,000 school districts that comprise the nation's public schools.

James Conant, in his widely read book, *Slums and Suburbs*, called attention to the

abyss separating urban and suburban school districts in their efforts for quality education and equality of educational opportunity. Conant referred to the cumbersome problem of urban school districts as representing "social dynamite." The reason indicated by Conant for writing *Slums and Surburbs* provides a pithy account of the urban dilemma:

> *I have done so because I am convinced we are allowing social dynamite to accumulate in our large cities. I am not nearly so concerned about the plight of suburban parents whose offspring are having difficulty finding places in prestige colleges as I am about the plight of parents in the slums whose children either drop out or graduate from school without prospects of either further education or employment. In some slum neighborhoods I have no doubt that over half of the boys between sixteen and twenty-one are out of school and out of work. Leaving aside human tragedies, I submit that a continuation of this situation is a menace to the social and political health of the large cities.*[6]

The social and economic pathologies that afflict the larger society affect the nation's public schools. Nowhere is the situation more ominous and disquieting than the nation's urban centers that are occupied by a huge sequestration of excluded and alienated children and youths. While there are social disorders and deviant behavior in suburban and urban schools, the most pronounced difficulties tend to be concentrated in areas of low socio-economic density.

Quality education and equality of educational opportunity are achievable in urban school districts if the fiscal and monetary resources are provided and the socio-economic encumbrances (i.e., inadequate health care, poor housing, unemployment, etc.) that thwart and impede scholastic achievement are removed.

In order to achieve quality in education and equality of opportunity, the multiple causal factors that give rise to disorder and

dislocations in the public schools must be met promptly. The socio-racial bifurcation that represents an overriding and central reason for tumult, restiveness, and disorder in too many schools must be extirpated. The twoness that W.E.B. DuBois prophetically and eloquently described 78 years ago remains firmly embedded in the body politic:

> *One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.*[7]

A second major cause of disorder and hostility directed at our public schools which severely affects the quality of education provided students is the presence of elitism and class distinctions. Historically, as has been indicated, in spite of the protestations to the contrary, elitism and classism have been powerful elements in determining what youngsters will receive excellence in education. The historic origins, to be sure, date back to 1635 with the founding of the Boston Latin Grammar School.

Where a child lives and the socio-economic level of his parents are, to an overwhelming degree, the chief determinants as to whether he receives high quality education.

Social class and elitism are anathema to the concept of equality of educational opportunity. The emphasis on higher achievement, success, and lofty academic and career aspirations has been replaced, particularly in large urban school districts, by an emphasis on custodial treatment and the maintenance of order. Creative, innovative, and effective teaching, in too many cases, is viewed as incidental.

The youngsters and their parents understand the educational warehousing or custodial education that engulfs a disproportionate number of them. High school diplomas in too many of our central city public high schools become passports to nowhere. It is these "graduates," along with those who either dropped out or were pushed out, who constitute the perennial losers in our society.

Another significant barrier to quality education and equality of educational opportunity is the current economic depression that weighs unequally on Blacks, the Spanish-surnamed and other nonwhite minorities in the nation. The level of unemployment among Black youths and adults is, in fact, greater than during the Great Depression when the nation initiated emergency economic measurers.

In spite of the multiplicity of societal problems that beset our public schools, quality in education and equality of educational opportunity are possible. Each youngster can be taught to acquire the basic skills, concepts, and understandings necessary to effectively compete in society. What is necessary is a coalescence of will, resources, and talent.

Summary

Nowhere is the need for quality in education more insistent and urgent than in the sprawling urban school districts of our nation. The outmigration of affluent white families, an eroded tax base, and an aura of despair and mythology that surround urban schools also have contributed to the difficulty encountered in achieving quality education in urban school districts. What is necessary is an endemic and continuing belief that all children, urban, suburban, and rural, are educable and capable of performing effectively in their classes.

Public schools possess the potential to deliver quality education. A mobilization of resources, talent, and expertise will enable public schools individually and collectively, to move this process forward.

It comes down to basically a matter of will and resources. If we believe that the lives of over 46 million students cannot be made better, then, they will not be better. Conversely, if tangible resources and realistic strategies are provided, then, the lives of more than 46 million students will be made better.

The expertise, skills, resources and will of local school districts and the nation must be mobilized to provide a triumph of human values, dignity, and quality education in all of our public schools. It is an awesome and formidable challenge that the nation must have the courage and will to confront as the 21st century beckons. □

The writer is coordinator of Social Studies for the Baltimore (Maryland) Public Schools.

REFERENCE

1. Newton Edwards and Herman G. Richey, *The School in the American Social Order,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), p. 310.
2. *Ibid.,* p. 311.
3. *Stuart v. School District No. 1 of the Village of Kalamazoo,* Michigan. 69.
4. Fred M. Hechinger, "Class War Over Tuition," New York *Times,* February 12, 1974, p. 18.
5. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka,* 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
6. James B. Conant, *Slums and Suburbs* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961), p. 2.
7. William E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications,) p. 17.